

*Life in Australia*

# Lyrebirds

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*Oxford University Press*





# LYREBIRDS



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## LYREBIRDS

IN the wet forests of the Great Divide — the tallest hard wood forests in the world — live some of Australia's most wonderful birds and animals. Among them are gliding possums, shy platypuses, and round, rather jolly wombats. The best-loved, however, are the Superb lyrebirds; without their ringing voices these Australian mountains would be quieter places. The lyrebird is quite large, about the size of a bantam rooster, and the male has a most wonderful tail. This tail gives the bird his name, for the two largest feathers, which might grow to a length of over two feet, are curved so that together they have the shape of an ancient Greek musical instrument called a lyre. But it is the bird's voice box that makes the song. This must be the stoutest voice box of all earth's 8,500 species of birds, for a lyrebird in full song can make your ears ring.

Although he is mostly brown, the male lyrebird is as beautiful in his own way as the most colourful parrot. His eyes are large, dark and bright. The feathers of his breast have a soft grey look under the brown, and his wings have a rich rusty tinge. But the tail is the most

striking part of all, for while most birds have only twelve tail feathers, the fortunate lyrebird has sixteen — the two main plumes, called lyrates, twelve shimmering 'wire' plumes, and two guard plumes which warn him when his tail is about to brush against anything that may damage it.



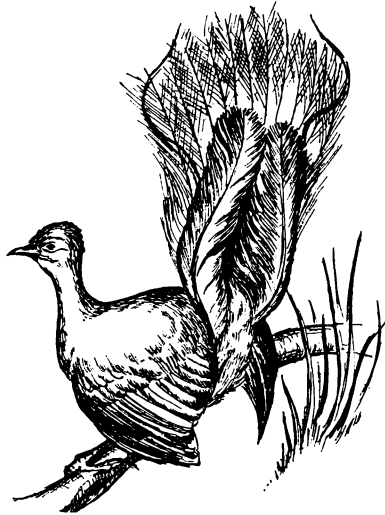
THE SUPERB LYREBIRD

The most striking thing about the lyrate plumes is not so much their beautifully curved shape, although that is very fine, especially where it rounds off in two 'knobs' of glistening black. It is the way that the bold pattern of these plumes is formed by a series of notches along the feathers' outer edge. These occur simply because only half the normal amount of webbing of the feathers grows in those places. In other words, they form little 'windows' all the way along the tail plumes. You can easily see through them, and they give the tail an attractive appearance.

When the bird starts to dance, and throws his tail forward over his head, these notches suddenly stand out.

The upper surfaces of all the tail feathers are dark, and the under-surfaces vary from silver to rusty white, so that the effect of the tail being suddenly thrown forward and spread is rather like a large flower bursting open.

But the dancing only takes place at certain times. The lyrebird spends most of his time on the ground, scratching in the earth of the forest floor for worms and for the small earth-hoppers he loves to eat. Because of this habit, the early Australian settlers thought he must have been some sort of rooster. This belief became so common that for many years he was known simply as the bush pheasant (for a pheasant is a kind of fowl).



THE ALBERT LYREBIRD

In the far north of the State of New South Wales, and in a small area of southern Queensland, lives a quite different sort of lyrebird to the one found in southern Australia. This is the Albert lyrebird, a slightly smaller bird whose feathers are redder and whose tail is not as beautiful. Very few people have seen *Menura alberti* (the name given to it by naturalists, meaning Prince

Albert's bird of the mighty tail). It hides in the dense rain forests of tropical mountains, and although it does not dance like the Superb lyrebird, it sings powerfully and mimics many of the neighbouring birds, including the yowling of the Green cat-bird, a sound which is unknown in southern forests.

Very few people take the trouble to see lyrebirds. The Mason family, who live in Melbourne, had never given them much thought until one day they heard a recording of the lyrebird's song on the radio. The children were thrilled by the sound and, when the announcer said that these birds could be heard by anyone who cared to try, they began to pester their parents to take them to the place where the birds are found. Father and Mother were interested, too; they had been to the forest a few years before, hoping to see or hear something of the lyrebirds. But they had not tried very hard. This time, Mr Mason said, he would get some information from a friend of his, Mr Bruce, who knew something about the birds. That way, they would have a better chance of success. Tim and Joan hoped that they would soon see a lyrebird.

The name of the forest where the tamest lyrebirds are found is Sherbrooke Forest, near the city of Melbourne, in southern Australia. This forest is kept in its native state by the Government, and over the years the lyrebirds have learned that human visitors will not harm them, and





SHERBROOKE FOREST

have become quite tame. In most other places they are so shy it is difficult even to see them.

If you go into Sherbrooke Forest in the month of May, which is in the Australian autumn, you will hear the ringing notes of a male lyrebird singing somewhere in the forest below. This is the time of mating, when the males sing and dance to attract female lyrebirds. The nests are usually started in autumn and the egg laid before the end of winter. This seems a strange hatching time, when freezing mists and rains sweep the forest, and the ground is some-

times blanketed in snow. But the young lyrebird needs all the preparation he can get over the spring, summer and autumn so that he will be strong enough to survive his first winter as an adult.

The Masons prepared for their day in the bush. On Friday Mother bought some fresh bread and ham for sandwiches, and some cheese to feed to the tamer lyrebirds; that night, father cleaned all their galoshes, for Sherbrooke is a damp place, and got out his field glasses. Saturday morning they set out early in the crisp sunshine



THE PICNIC LUNCH AT SHERBROOKE

that had the first touch of winter about it. They were in no hurry, and the twenty miles to the Dandenong Ranges, with its steeper, winding section toward the end, took them nearly an hour.

The air seemed freezing after their drive in a warm car, and Mrs Mason made them put their coats and galoshes on right away.

Mr Mason got out some dry kindling he had brought in the boot of the car, and the children collected an armful of dry gum leaves with which to start the fire. The gum leaves sputtered and blazed with a wonderful scent, and in a few minutes the billy was boiling away merrily. As Mrs Mason dropped in a handful of tea-leaves she caught Mr Mason's eye and smiled, because in Australia boiling the billy over an open fire in the bush is something people, even old people, like to do very much. It seems to make them feel like the early settlers again. Tim thought it was very kind of the Government to provide a strong brick fireplace for them, but his father told him it was put there to stop people lighting their fires in the bush in summer and causing bush fires. Then Tim remembered the terrible fires he had seen on television during his summer holidays that year, and the blackened faces of all the firefighters. When his father told him that the fire had come within a mile of this very forest before a change of wind turned it back he felt a little frightened for a moment, but his

father added, 'It's safe today, Tim. The bush is too wet to burn'. Nevertheless, when they had finished their tea and sandwiches, he and Joan scraped the ashes of the fire right out, so no sparks could fly.

While Mrs Mason put away the picnic things, Mr Mason read through the notes he had taken while Mr Bruce was telling him about the lyrebirds. Then they set off. Their feet made no sound on the soft red earth, and the tall trees stood very still and quiet. Tim felt a little frightened, and held Joan's hand to make her brave. They walked for nearly a mile, and when they stopped for a rest Mr Mason told the children that as the season for choosing a mate approaches, the male lyrebird does something very interesting. He selects a 'territory', from which he seldom strays for the next six months. Sometimes he must drive other male lyrebirds away from this territory, but usually his singing is enough to announce to all the world that he has claimed this part of the forest for his own.

Sometimes the territory is large, about a quarter mile square. More often it is smaller. In the territory are certain branches and rocks and logs which are his favourites, and he often stops to sing or preen his feathers at these places. Once he is recognized as the owner of a territory, the male lyrebird selects a number of places among ferns, or perhaps by a large tree or a fallen log,



LYREBIRDS FEEDING IN THE FOREST

from which he removes all the grasses and small ferns from an area about four feet round. Then he scratches the earth up to form a low hill. This is his dancing mound, the stage on which he will perform to attract and win his mate.

He might make as many as ten or twelve of these mounds, and he visits them regularly. Sometimes the visits are short, and the bird simply scratches about and puts everything in order. At other times he may stay half an



#### THE MASONS SEE

hour, singing and dancing and mimicking all the other birds in the forest with his wonderful voice.

Mr Mason had just reached this point in his story when suddenly in the undergrowth below the trees a little way off the track there was a loud-ringing burst of song, followed by the 'whiiiip, crack!' of a whipbird. They all



### THE LYREBIRD

said 'Sssh'! at once and began to creep forward through the bushes to see if it was a lyrebird. As they went forward the song burst out again, so loud now that it seemed to hurt their ears. Then they saw him. He was standing on a fallen log with his wonderful tail hanging close to the ground, and as he caught sight of them he threw back his

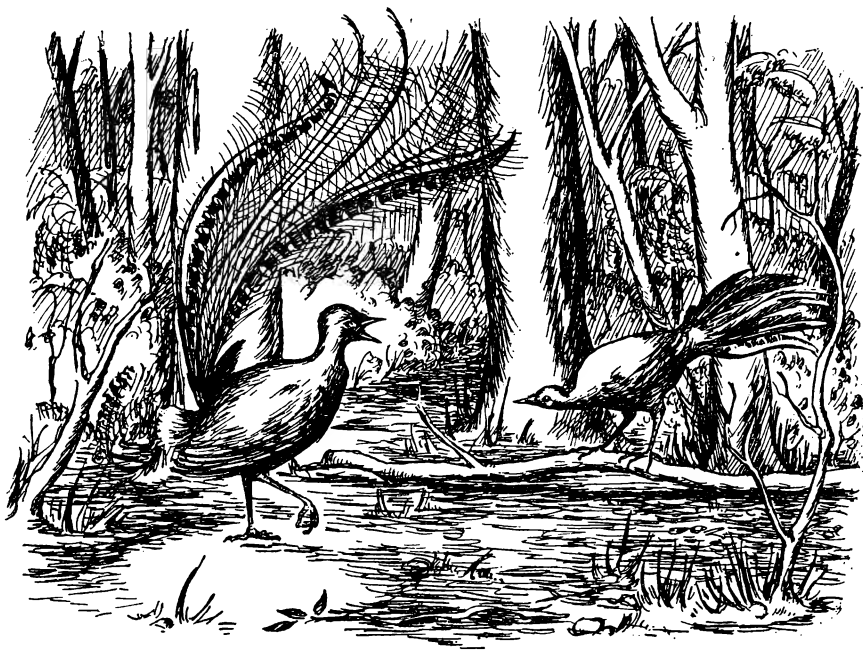
head and poured out a stream of rich, liquid song. They were so close they could see his little clouds of breath frosting in the cold air. One after another he repeated the calls of all the other birds in the forest. The clear, silvery note of the little brown Pilot Bird, which so often scratches with the lyrebird on the forest floor; the scream of the Black Cockatoo; the chattering, and even the wing noises, of a flock of the same Crimson Rosellas they had seen earlier; the long, lonely call of a Currawong. All these and many more came tumbling out, spaced out with the lyrebird's own bold refrain.

The Masons were very lucky. Soon the bird ceased in mid-song with his little cap of head feathers raised. He listened, head-on-the-side. Then he ruffled both his wings, dropped to the ground, and ran quickly away through the ferns. The whole family followed, scrambling under branches, slithering over moss-covered logs. The lyrebird plunged into a group of tall ferns and then, as they approached, burst out again in a marvellous song, even stronger than before. Creeping forward slowly, the Masons saw with a start of delight that he was on a dancing mound, whose chocolate earth had been freshly turned over. They were only ten feet away when the lyrebird took a step forward and then suddenly threw his tail forward over his head in a silvery umbrella. It covered the whole bird. The two lyre-shaped plumes were held



wide out at either side, and the entire space in between was filled with the other plumes. All they could see of the bird, although he was facing them, was the lower part of his breast, and his legs.

They stood silent for five minutes while the bird again went through his whole range of calls. Then suddenly a change came over him. He stopped, peered intently into the ferns, and then as a female bird showed herself for a



THE LYREBIRD AND HIS MATE

second on the other side of the mound, the male began to dance. But what sort of sound was this? A rustling, zizzing note filled the air. It was the prelude to the dance proper. It went on for ten, twenty seconds as the bird turned his body this way and that, always in the general direction of the place where the female had disappeared, and all the time he held his tail closed and thrust forward over his head like a cocked hat, shivering it with excitement. Suddenly the zizzing sound gave way to a rhythmic beat like many small leathery drums. Spacing out each third beat, the bird gave a loud 'clang clang', like a blacksmith's hammer hitting his anvil, and with each 'clang' he gave a quick 'knees half bend' so that linked all together the bird was dancing to the beat of his own rhythm. With each hop his two wings were clapped against his body. A stick poking out of the ground attracted his attention, and he turned on it, spreading his tail over it, dancing around in a circle as though his beak was tied to the point of the stick, all the time crying 'chung ada chung ada chung ada!', 'chung ada chung ada chung ada!'.

Just as the Masons were getting stiff from crouching down, the bird suddenly stopped and let his tail lift slowly back over his head while he glanced round for the female. For a moment he thought he saw her, and his tail was quickly thrown forward over his head again with a dry rustle. He burst into melody, once more imitating whip-



FEEDING THE LYREBIRD

birds, thrushes and cockatoos, then a butcher bird, and then another flock of parrots. But it was no use; the female had gone away. Except for the Masons, no audience wanted to hear him. Quickly his excitement left him. He lowered his lovely tail, gave a quick ruffle of his feathers, and walked off the mound with a dignified air. The performance was over.

The Mason children were fascinated; their eyes shone with the excitement bubbling over inside them. As soon as they dared, they all began talking at once. How

wonderful it was! Could they catch it? Just once? Mr Mason laughed and shook his head.

‘Come on’, he said to them, ‘Let’s go and watch how he digs up his food. So they found their way out of the undergrowth, and there was the lyrebird scratching on the side of the track, watching them out of its liquid eyes. They could see how good its big curved claws and strong feet were for digging, and the lovely glossy black and tan on the outer side of its tail-plumes.

All the next day the children could think and talk of nothing else, and Mr Mason promised to borrow some more books from Mr Bruce so they could learn more about the wonderful bird. He even got his friend to come and spend a whole evening with them, telling them about the lyrebird’s ways, and showing them the colour photographs he had taken of female lyrebirds at their nests.

Tim and Joan learned that the history of the lyrebird has been extremely interesting. From a book about lyrebirds written by Mr A. H. Chisholm, *The Romance of the Lyrebird*, they learned that the very first lyrebirds to be seen by white men were discovered by a lad called John Wilson in the year 1798, only ten years after Australia was first settled. He came from Wigan, in Lancashire, England, and had been sentenced to transportation as a convict for stealing tenpence worth of cloth. He was held in a prison hulk for some time before coming



CONVICTS IN THE BUSH

out to Australia on board the *Alexandre* with the First Fleet in 1788. When his prison term expired in 1792 he 'went bush' and lived with wild aborigines until 1797, when he was forced to come in and give himself up to the authorities. By this time his body and limbs were decorated with aboriginal tribal marks, probably put there by cutting the flesh and rubbing ashes into the cuts to prevent them from healing. Deeply sunburned, his likeness to an aboriginal was made stronger by the kangaroo-skin apron he wore. Among the creatures he claimed to have seen

while in the hills were some pheasants; which later proved to be lyrebirds.

Once the bird became known to the colonists, and people in England and Europe heard about it, there was a growing call for lyrebird skins and tails, for museums and for decorations. For nearly 100 years almost any lyrebird that showed itself to a man with a gun was immediately shot.

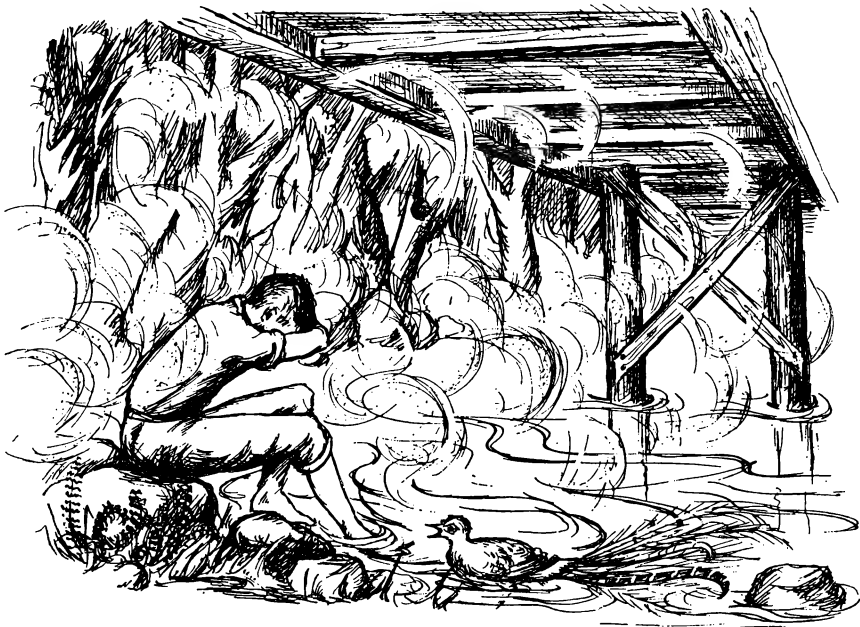
So prized did the plumes become at one time that up to £20 for a single tail was being offered for them. Lyre-birding became a profitable business, and some men became full-time lyrebird shooters. Thousands of the tails were sent overseas, many going to London, which was the world's trading centre for bird plumes. In some years the London dealers traded not thousands, but millions of bird plumes, many of which came from beautiful white wading birds called egrets.

So widespread did the slaughter become that toward the end of last century the Government of the State of Victoria placed the lyrebird on the list of birds which are completely protected. Other States followed this example, and today you can be heavily fined for killing or catching a lyrebird anywhere in Australia.

Because of the damage done by shooters before these laws were passed, and because foxes introduced to the forests for the sport of fox-hunting kill many lyrebirds,

efforts are being made to make sure that lyrebirds continue to live in our forests. Some have been caught alive in snares and sent to the island State of Tasmania, which has been separated from the mainland of Australia for about 10,000 years, and has no native lyrebirds of its own. In Sherbrooke Forest, men employed by the State Forests Commission put out the poisoned bodies of rabbits or fowls to kill foxes.

Tim and Joan heard many other interesting stories. They heard the tale of the forestry worker who was trapped



THE FORESTRY WORKER TRAPPED IN A BUSHFIRE

under a bridge in a stream by a bushfire. Feeling something move against him he looked and found it was a male lyrebird which was also sheltering from the fire. The man and the bird lay there for some time until the worst danger had passed.

They also heard the story of the first naturalists who went out to study and tame the birds in Sherbrooke Forest. In those days cars were not as common as they are today, and the men had to travel by train and carry their supplies into the forest on their backs. One naturalist went there so often he turned a large hollow log into a shelter, and spent many week-ends studying the birds. Another Melbourne man made the first lyrebird film, and even arranged a direct broadcast of its song over the Australian radio network.

The work of these pioneers has made it possible for thousands of visitors to Sherbrooke, including many people from overseas, to see lyrebirds carrying on their daily lives as though no humans are about; something that it is not easy to do in most other lyrebird country.

All this history interested the Mason children very much, but when Mr Bruce suggested they make another trip into Sherbrooke Forest to try to find a lyrebird's nest, they began to jump up and down with joy. Pleased that they were so interested, Mr Bruce told them all he could think of about the nesting habits of lyrebirds, so they

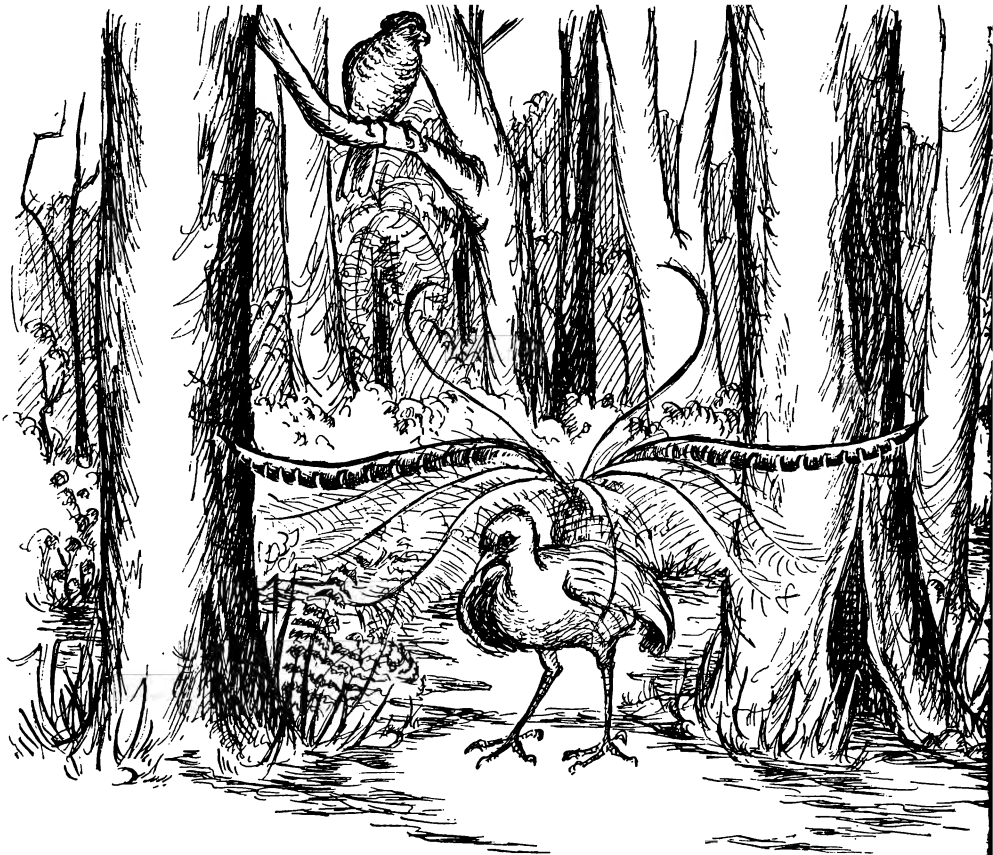




A NATURALIST AT SHERBROOKE FOREST

would have something to think and talk about before they went off on their trip.

In May or June, he said, or even later, the female lyrebird, having accepted one particular male as a mate, chooses her own territory in the depth of the forest. There she finds a place to make her nest. It might be on the ground amongst sword grass, or on a stump, or high in a forest tree. But wherever it is, one thing is always the



THE FEMALE LYREBIRD BUILDS HER

same — the female builds the whole nest herself, with no help from her mate, who sings and dances the day away. In fact, she not only builds the nest but broods the egg and attends to the raising of the young lyrebird



#### OWN NEST WITHOUT THE MALE'S HELP

with no help at all from the male. He may never even know where the nest is. But this does not mean that he is of no use to his family. His singing and dancing probably help attract the attention of hawks and marsupial

cats, and in this indirect way his presence protects the female and young from danger.

Mr Bruce told them so much more that Tim and Joan wanted to go off to the forest the following Saturday. But they had to wait until July before Mr Bruce rang to say that he thought it was the right time to find a nest. It was a grey day, and for a little time it looked as though it would rain at any moment. Mrs Mason made them wait at the car until it cleared, and this was very difficult for them because somewhere down in the dripping forest they could hear the clear, bold song of a male lyrebird.



ON THE WAY TO THE NEST

Mr Bruce went ahead and presently came back and beckoned them silently to follow. Then there was a movement and a female lyrebird walked out in front of them. They could tell she was a female because she was somehow quieter in appearance than the male they had seen, and her tail was different. Instead of the lovely plumes her feathers were broad, brown and shiny. And there was something else. It had a distinct bend in it, so that it curled around to one side. When Mr Bruce saw this he whispered, 'That's our bird! Her tail's kinked from sitting in the cramped nest!'

The bird scratched in the ground at the end of the log, turning over yards of earth in her endless search for worms and the small insects of the surface layer. As each came to light she gobbled it up until her throat pouch, where she carries food for the youngster, was bulging. At last she stopped feeding, and with two worms wriggling out either side of her bill, set off through the tree-ferns, hopping over logs and branches with the agility of a cat. The party could barely catch up with her. At last, just as they thought they had lost her, she suddenly appeared on a log ahead of them and fluttered up into the head of a tree-fern. Mr Bruce let out a small cry of satisfaction. It was the nest.

They watched while the mother bird hung on the outside of the nest, with her head in the doorway, and when she

had flown down they went quietly forward to inspect it. It was about five feet above the ground, built in the fronds of the tree fern and was about the size of a very large medicine ball, with an entrance in the side. Mr Bruce very carefully lifted each of the children up. They could just see the helpless black golliwog of a youngster lying on a thick mat of feathers the female had plucked from her own flanks, the only material in the forest warm and dry enough for the egg and the young bird to lie on. After they had inspected the nest carefully they quickly and quietly left, so that the female would not be disturbed.

Once the nest is finished the female leaves it for a week or two before she lays her egg, and then, after the egg is laid, actually leaves it lying cold in the nest for another week while she spends her day digging out and eating as much food as she can find, to prepare herself for the heavy work of rearing the single young. There is never more than one, for she would not be able to find enough food to keep them going. And besides, the nest would be too small.

Once she starts to brood the egg she must snatch her meals in quick trips away from the nest, for the egg must never be allowed to become really cold. This goes on for six weeks, and after the egg hatches it becomes even worse, for she must not only keep the youngster warm for the first couple of weeks, but also provide for his growing appetite.

As he grows, she makes dozens of trips into the surrounding forest each day, returning with her throat pouch bulging. And every two or three trips she must remove the youngster's droppings from the nest and carry them away, so that no enemy will be able to follow the scent to the nest. Sometimes, if there is a stream nearby, she puts the droppings in the water, so that the scent will be washed away. If there is no stream, she buries them. She does the same with any stray feathers. Nothing must be allowed



FEEDING A TAME CRIMSON ROSELLA PARROT

to hint the presence of the nest, for to the female's mother instinct, the youngster's life is as precious as her own.

For the first two weeks the young lyrebird is rather helpless. But then two things begin to happen. His feet and legs seem to grow much faster than the rest of his body, and he begins to put on a very thick coat of grey down to protect him from the winter cold. Many young lyrebirds, hatching in June, must sit in their nests with a roof of snow overhead, for June is mid-winter in Australia. Sometimes even the walls of the nest are quite wet from the rain and snow, but so cosy is the coat of down the young bird wears that he suffers no ill effects.

About this time, too, he develops a habit which protects him from any enemy who might discover the nest. Becoming inquisitive, he often stands with his head poking a little way out of the entrance of the nest, watching the comings and goings of other creatures of the forest; the scrub-wrens with their nest in the swordgrass, or perhaps a small marsupial mouse who ventures out in short rushes from his nest under a log. The youngster also hears a good deal, for lyrebirds have wonderful ears. The laugh of kookaburras, the midnight screeching of gliding opossums, the scolding of shrike-tits in the branches 100 feet overhead soon become familiar to him. Because he soon knows these sounds, he also knows when anything strange appears. Then his head pops back inside the nest,





TIM AND JOAN FIND SOME TAIL FEATHERS

like the cuckoo in a cuckoo clock, and he lies low until the danger passes.

Once the youngster is fully grown and out and about, the male lyrebird may condescend to take some notice of him, and actually feed him. At least, he does not chase him away.

As spring turns to summer it is sometimes possible to see eight or nine lyrebirds feeding together in Sherbrooke Forest. You may see males still with their long tails,

females with their tails just starting to straighten out after being curled from long periods in the cramped nest, and juvenile lyrebirds — recognizable by the patch of reddish brown on their throats. This gathering together is a sign that the nesting season is over, and that the male birds are giving up their territories.

Now you may hear the songs of the young male birds. Although they do not have the wonderful plumes of their fathers, they spread their broad, female-like tails and dance at any time of the day, both on mounds and anywhere on the forest floor. At first their songs are a little rusty around the edges, but they soon become expert, and throw out very passable imitations of kookaburras and even the tiny, delicate notes of thornbills.

As summer approaches, another change takes place. The old male lyrebirds, instead of singing and dancing to make themselves noticed, become very shy, and keep to the denser parts of the forest. Their moulting season has come, and they are about to lose their plumes. For a few weeks they will be tailless, and look like oversized quails. At this time, a wanderer through the forest may be lucky enough to come across one of the discarded plumes.

If you are ever in the high country of south-eastern Australia, make sure you go into the forests where the lyrebirds are. It is something you will always remember.



## *Life in Australia*



This is a series with a double purpose. The books in it were originally intended as simple introductions to Australia, its life and people, for young readers overseas. Each was planned as a brief account of a single subject presented in such a way that it would be easily comprehended even by readers who were unfamiliar with Australia, or Australian idioms. As a result the books, although equally enjoyable for Australian readers, because of the way in which they present so much information in a pleasant and easy-to-read form, are also especially suitable for presents to send overseas, or for newcomers to Australia.

*Oxford University Press*